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PAGODAS OF PAGAN

By

Thiripyanchi U Lu Pe Win, M.A., of Archæological Survey,
Ministry of Culture

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Pagan

Pagan, on the left bank of the Irrawaddy, is about 90 miles below Mandalay. It was an ancient Burmese capital and the city which is seen today in ruins was founded by King Pyinbya, the 34th king of the dynasty, in 847 A.D. It remained the capital until the extinction of the dynasty at the end of the 13th century. It was during Anawrahta's reign (1044-77) that religious enthusiasm was aroused here and the construction of pagodas and temples on a large scale began. He conquered Thaton in Mon country and brought King Manuha as captive, and a large retinue of state officials and artisans. Above all Anawrahta obtained the cherished prize of the Three Pitakas (the Theravada scriptures), and firmly established the pure faith at Pagan. Successive kings followed his example in erecting pagodas and temples so that this period in Burmese history is known as the age of the temple builders. Up to early twelfth century the architectural style at the Burmese capital was considerably influenced by that of the Mons. Thousands of religious buildings sprang up during two and half centuries but owing to the ravages of wars and other weathering factors of the past the monuments now lie in all stages of decay. The ruins cover a tract of country measuring about sixteen square miles, and less than a hundred of the monuments remain well preserved today.

According to tradition the BUPAYA on the river bank at Pagan is the oldest of the shrines. It was built by Pyusawdi, the third king of Pagan who reigned from 162-243 A.D. Legend has it that the pagoda was built on a spot where a gigantic *Bu* or gourd creeper grew. Its luxuriant and persistent growth proved a serious obstacle to the extension of the cultivation of cereals in those days, and its complete eradication was ascribed to the efforts of Pyusawdi, who subsequently became the son-in-law and heir of King Thamokdayit, the founder of Pagan. To commemorate the event, the Pagoda was built by Pyusawdi. It had been repaired and renovated by successive kings.

The predominant and characteristic type of monument is that of the vaulted temple like the *Ananda*. It is in plan a square of nearly 200 feet to the side and broken on each side by the projection of large gabled vestibules, which convert the plan into a perfect Greek cross. These vestibules are

somewhat lower than the main square mass of the building, which elevates itself to a height of 35 feet in two tiers of windows. Above this rise successively diminishing terraces, the last of which just affording breadth for the spire which crowns and completes the edifice. The lower half of this spire is in the form of a mitre-like pyramid adapted from the temples of India ; the upper half is the same moulded tapering pinnacle that terminates the common bell-shaped pagodas of Pagan. The gilded *htee* (umbrella) caps the whole at a height of 168 feet above the ground.

It was built by Kyanzittha in 1091 A.D., that is a little later than the Norman Conquest of England. It contains Gothic arches and stone sculptures of exquisite workmanship, representing scenes in Gautama Buddha's life, and terracotta tiles respresenting scenes in the previous existences of the Buddha. It enshrines four colossal standing images of the four Buddhas of the present world-cycle, and portrait statues of its founder Kyanzittha and the Primate, Shin Arahan.

Close to the Ananda Temple is the field MUSEUM containing exhibits illustrating the iconography, architecture and religious history of Pagan. Most of the valuable entiquities had been stored away in a safer place since the war years and the museum still remains closed to the public. Along the verandahs of the museum are inscribed stones collected from the vicinity. They record religious endowments of the Pagan period in different languages, *viz.* Burmese, Mon, Pyu, Pāli, Tamil, Siamese and Chinese.

The second great temple of Pagan is the THATBYINNYU, signifying "Omniscience", one of the attributes of Buddha. It was built in 1144 A.D. by Alaungsithu, grandson of the King who erected the Ananda. Standing within the ancient city walls, some 500 yards to the south-west of the Ananda, the Thatbyinnyu rises to a height of 201 feet above the ground and overtops all the other monuments. Its general plan is not unlike the Ananda, but it does not, like the latter, form a symmetrical cross. The eastern porch alone projects considerably from the wall. It has five storeys; the first and second were used as the residence of monks ; images were kept on the third ; the fourth was used as a library ; and on the fifth was constructed a pagoda containing holy relics. The building is thus a combination of a *stupa* and *vihara*.

GAWDAWPALIN

The Gawdawpalin (near the Circuit House) is one of the greater temples kept in repair. It was build by Narapatisithu who reigned from 1173-1210 A.D. in order to commemorate the ceremony of paying homage to the *manes* of his ancestors. In its general arrangement it resembles the Ananda more closely than any other and covers about the same area in spite of its vestibules and the greater height of its main walls.

PATOTHAMYA TEMPLE

Popularly believed to be one of the five pagodas built by King Taungthugyi in the 10th century A.D. on the model of those that were then existing at Thaton and Old Prome. This is only a tradition and it is not yet possible to confirm the date. It is decorated with frescoes illustrating scenes from the Buddha's life with legends in Old Mon in archaic type of characters. The architecture of the temple is typically Mon, and from the style of the paintings and the legend below each scene the temple itself cannot be assigned to a date later than 11th century A.D.

NAT-HLAUNG-KYAUNG TEMPLE

Supposed to be built by King Taungthugyi in 931 A.D., *i.e.* over a century before the introduction of the southern school of Buddhism from Thaton. It is the only Hindu Temple now existing at Pagan. As it is dedicated to Vishnu, it is decorated, on the outside with stone figures of the 'Ten Avatars', Gautama, being the Ninth. There are wall paintings in this temple which are contemporaneous with the building and the sculptures. These have become mostly obliterated. The temple being essentially a Vishnu temple, the paintings represent seated figures of Vishnu with his devotees. Occupying the centre of the temple is a huge square pillar in brick, around which there is the usual circumambulatory passage, vaulted over ; this pillar supports the dome and sikhara above. On each face of it there was originally the figure of a standing deity placed in a niche adorned with pilasters. These are representations of Vishnu cult in relief in bricks.

PITAKAT TAIK OR LIBRARY

Built in 1058 A.D. by Anawrahta to house the thirty elephant loads of the Buddhist scriptures in Pāli, which he brought away from Thaton, and repaired, in 1783 A.D.by King Bodawpaya of the Alaung-paya dynasty. It is lighted by perforated stone windows. Its chief peculiarity is its approximate simulation of architectural form in wood in that it is covered by five multiple roofs surmounted by a *dubika*, like the Mandalay Palace Spire, and ornamented with peacock-like finials in plaster carving.

SHWEGUGYI

It is a lesser but elegant temple built by Alaungsithu in 1131 A.D., after the model of the "Sleeping chamber" of Buddha. Its history is recorded on two stone slabs set in the inner walls. The lithic inscription is celebrated for the style and elegance of its composition, thereby indicating the high culture and refinement of that period. Close to this temple is a brick pillar, erected to mark the site of Kyanzittha's palace which being of wood exists no more.

MAHABODHI

This pagoda was built by Nandaungmya (1210-34 A.D.) after the model of the temple at Bodh Gaya in Bengal, and is the only specimen of its class to be found in Burma. The basement is a quadrangular block of no great height, supporting a tall spire. The whole structure is covered with niches bearing seated Buddhas and interspersed with ornamental panels and mouldings.

KUBYAUKKYI TEMPLE

The temple was built in 1115 A.D. by Rajakumar, son of Kyanzittha, as testified by the quadrilingual inscription known as the Myazedi Pillar. The temple consisting of a square basement surmounted by a sikhhra with curvilinear roofs resting on terraces, with a mandapa projecting

on the east face. The interior of the building has a sanctum around which runs a vaulted corridor adorned with niches enshrining images of the Buddha in stone. The building is lighted by perforated stone windows on which are incised geometrical designs of fine proportions. The architecture of this temple is typically Mon. The greatest importance, however, attaches to the paintings in the sanctum, in the corridors surrounding it, and in the entrance porch. These paintings are considered to be contemporaneous with the building and are among the earliest now extant at Pagan. Additional interest attaches to these paintings on account of the legend in Old Mon under each of the scenes they depict; these inscriptions are not only interesting from an epigraphical point of view but also help us to identify the scenes.

NANPAYA TEMPLE

It lies close to the Manuha Temple. According to tradition it was used as the residence of the captive Mon King, Manuha. It is built of brick and mud mortar and surfaced with stone, and is square in plan with a porch projecting on the east face. Flanking the sanctuary in the main building there are four stone pillars on the sides of each of which are carved triangular floral designs and the figure of the Brahma holding lotus flowers in each hand. Like other earlier temples at Pagan it has perforated stone windows to admit light into the sanctuary.

MANUHA TEMPLE

It was built by Manuha, the captive Mon King of Thaton, in 1059 A.D. It is a reduplicated square structure with a battlemented terrace, the upper storey being smaller than the lower, so that the entire building appears to assume the form of a pyramid. It contains three images of seated Buddhas and a recumbent image of gigantic proportions representing Buddha in the act of entering Nirvana.

The temple is an allegorical representation of the physical discomfort and mental distress, the captive King of Thoton was in. The builder's grievance is graphically demonstrated by the uncomfortably seated and sleeping Buddhas. Take away the Buddhas and other Buddhistic details you have, conjecturally, an example of early jail architecture in Burma.

UPALI THEIN (Ordination Hall)

Situated close to the Htilominlo Temple. This ordination hall was named after a celebrated monk, Upali, who became primate of Burma; he lived during the reign of Kings Nandaungmya (1210-34 A.D.) and Kyazwa (1234-50 A.D.) and the foundation of this building may be assigned to the second quarter of the 13th century A.D. It is a structure of fine proportions enclosed within brick walls. It is rectangular in plan, and contains a hall with an image of the Buddha placed on a pedestal at one end of it. The roof is ornamented with a double row of battlements in simulation of wooden architecture, and its centre is surmounted by a small, slim pagoda. The arches, on which the superstructure rests, are well built; and the fine and brilliant frescoes covering its walls and ceilings are in an excellent state of preservation. They belong to the late 17th or early 18th century A.D. Shorn of the Buddhistic architectural details, this Upali Sima, at least its external appearance reminds the spectator of wheel-less Vishnu raths of South India particularly of Conjeevaram and Mahabalipuram.

HTILOMINLO TEMPLE

Built in 1218 A.D. by King Nandaungmya to commemorate the spot, where he was chosen to be crown prince out of five brothers. The rival claimants were ranged around a white umbrella, which, by means of stratagem, was made to incline towards Nandaungmya, who was accordingly appointed to succeed his father, Narapatisithu. It is a double-storeyed temple surmounted by a **sikhara**. In place of terracotta tiles, it is decorated with pieces of sandstone glazed in a green colour. The walls are ornamented with mural writings and frescoes which have weathered. There are four Buddhas facing the cardinal points on the ground floor as well as on the upper storey, which is reached by two staircases built in the thickness of the walls. On the latter the corridor is flanked by two rows of niches enshrining stone sculptures, which are ruder in finish than those in the Ananda. Most of the niches are, however, empty. On the walls of the south-eastern window are horoscopes of certain personages, which were inscribed in order to secure them against damage or destruction.

SHWEZIGON PAGODA

It is a solid, cylindrical structure quite distinct in style of architecture from others and is a prototype of similar structures in Burma. It was built by King Anawrahta, who left it in an unfinished state, and completed by Kyanzittha (1084-1112 A.D.). Around the terraces of the pagoda, there are, set in panels, enamelled plaques illustrating scenes in the previous lives of the Buddha. It is believed to contain the frontal bone and a tooth of the Buddha and is thus held in great veneration by the Buddhists of the whole of Burma. On each of the four sides of the pagoda is a small temple which enshrines a standing Buddha of the Gupta school of art. The history of the pagoda is written in Old Mon on all the faces of two square stone pillars standing on the right and left of the eastern approach to the pagoda. At the north-east corner of the platform there are, placed in a shed, figures of the 37 nats or spirits, which were the pre-Buddhistic deities of Burma. There is an annual festival held in honour of the pagoda.

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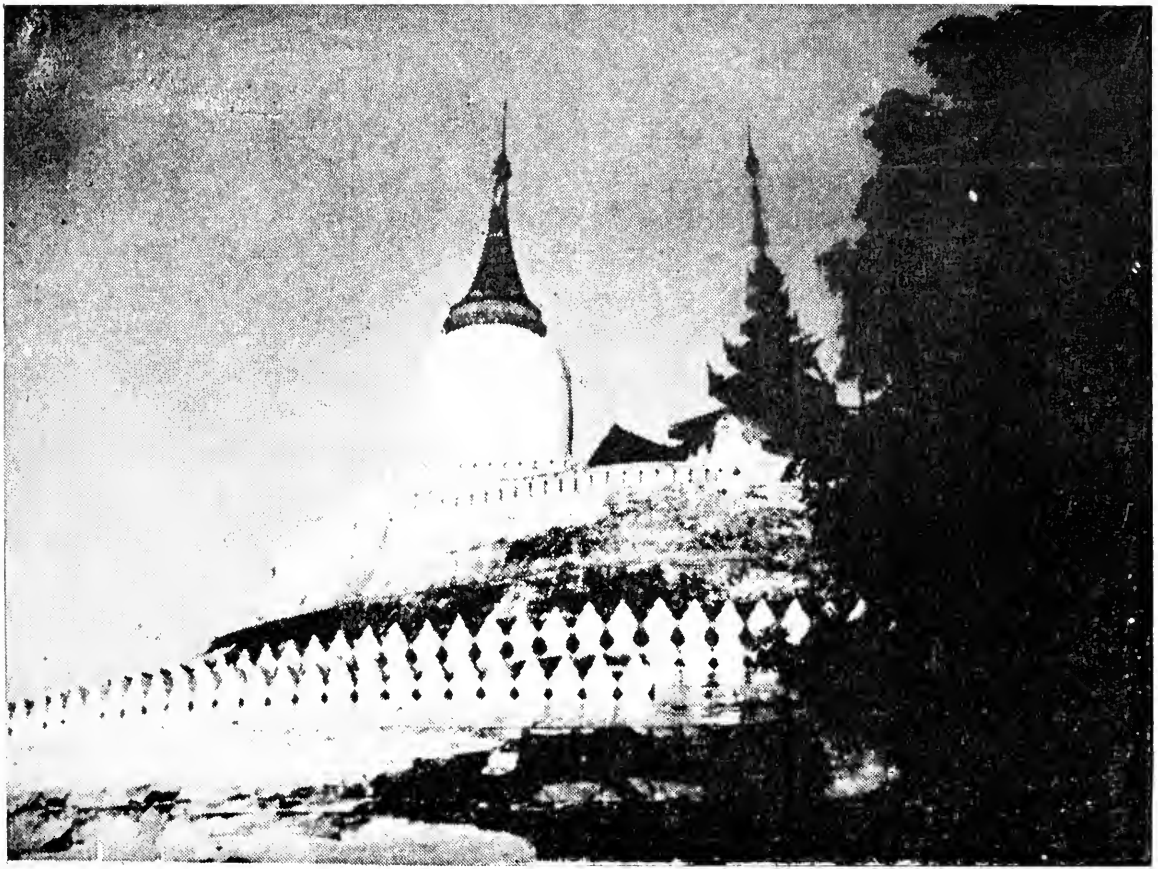
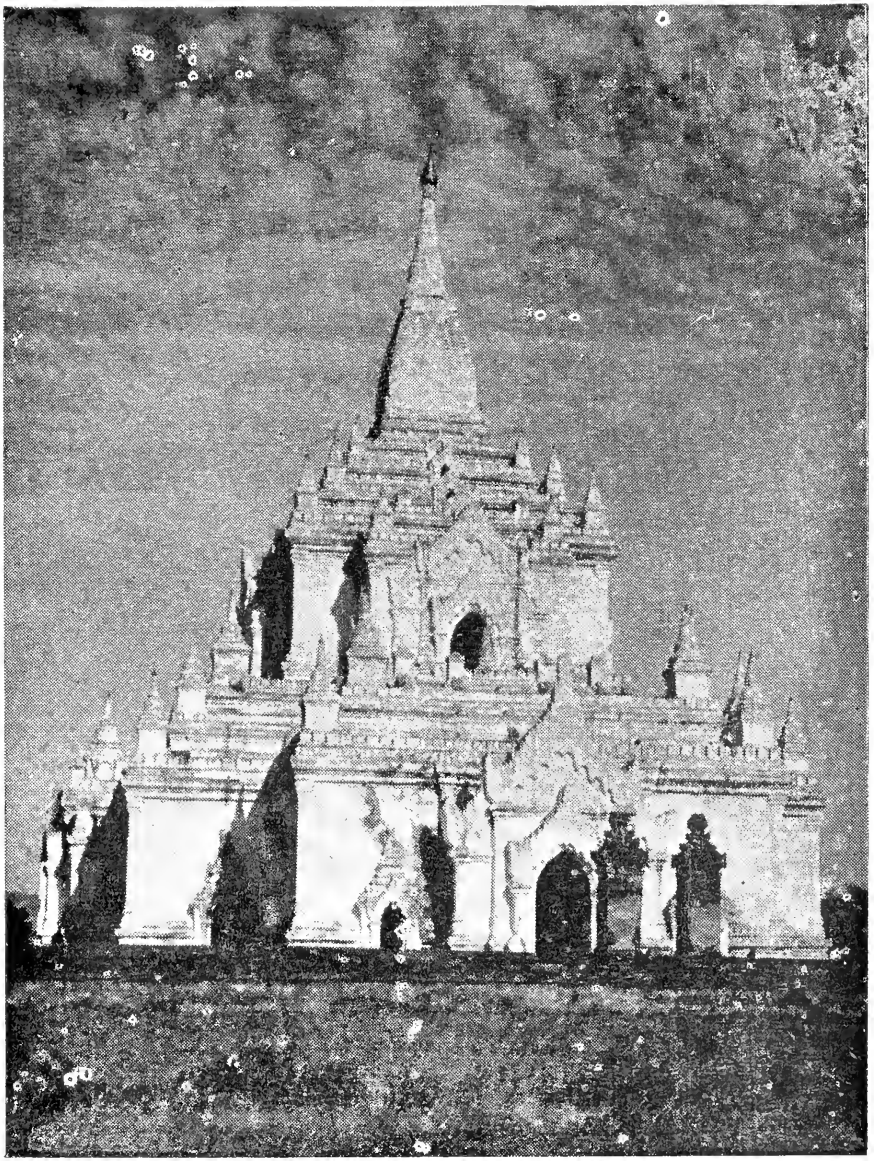


A **Bupaya**

The Ananda Temple

Thatbyinnyu Temple



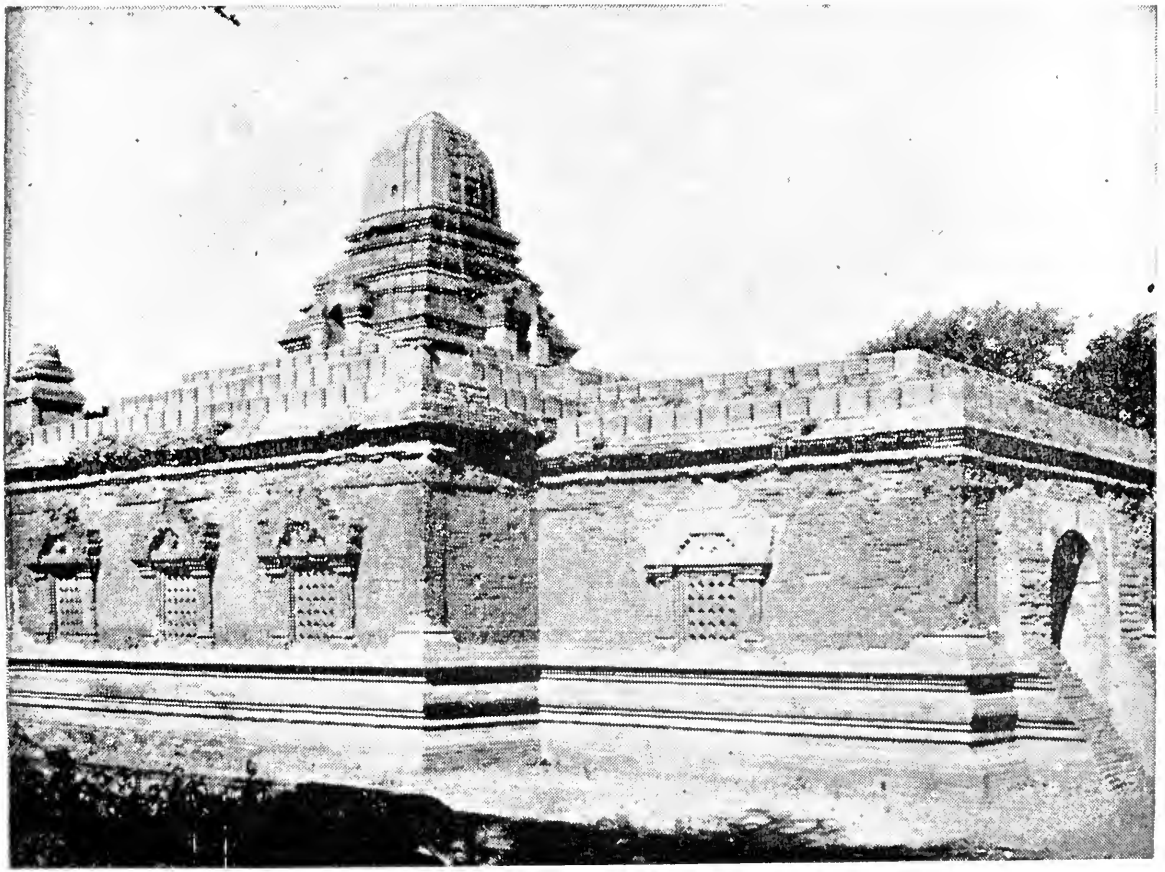
The Gawdawpalin

Nat-Hlaung Kyaung or Vishnu Temple

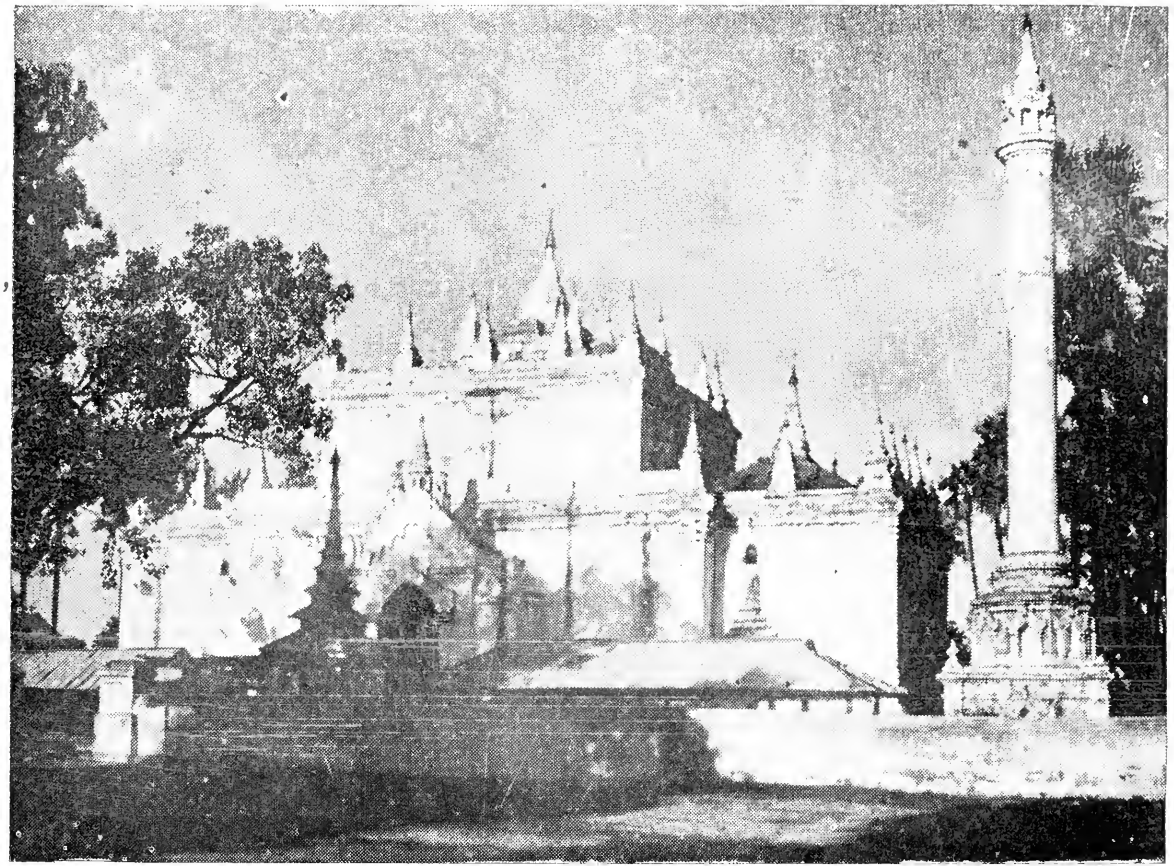
Piṭaka Taik or Library

The Mahabodhi Temple

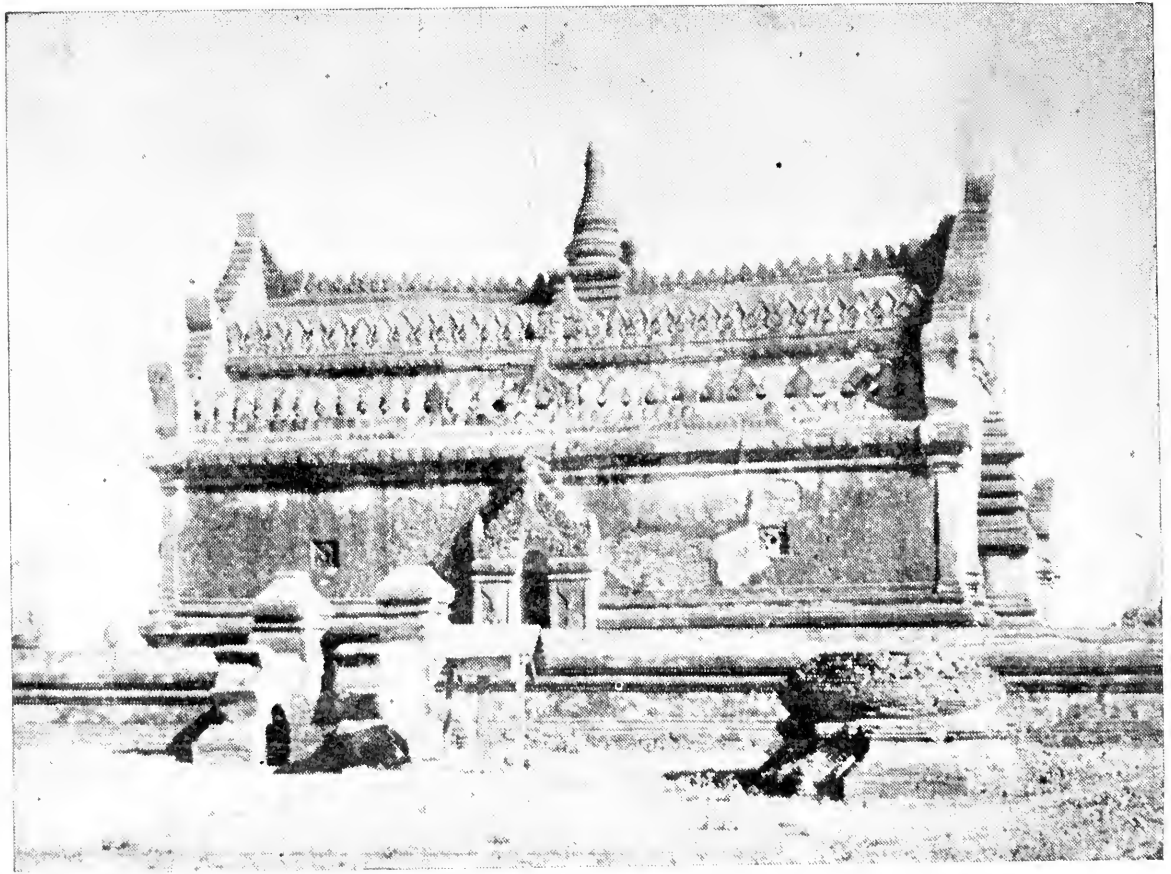
Kubyaukkyi Temple



B Nanpaya Temple

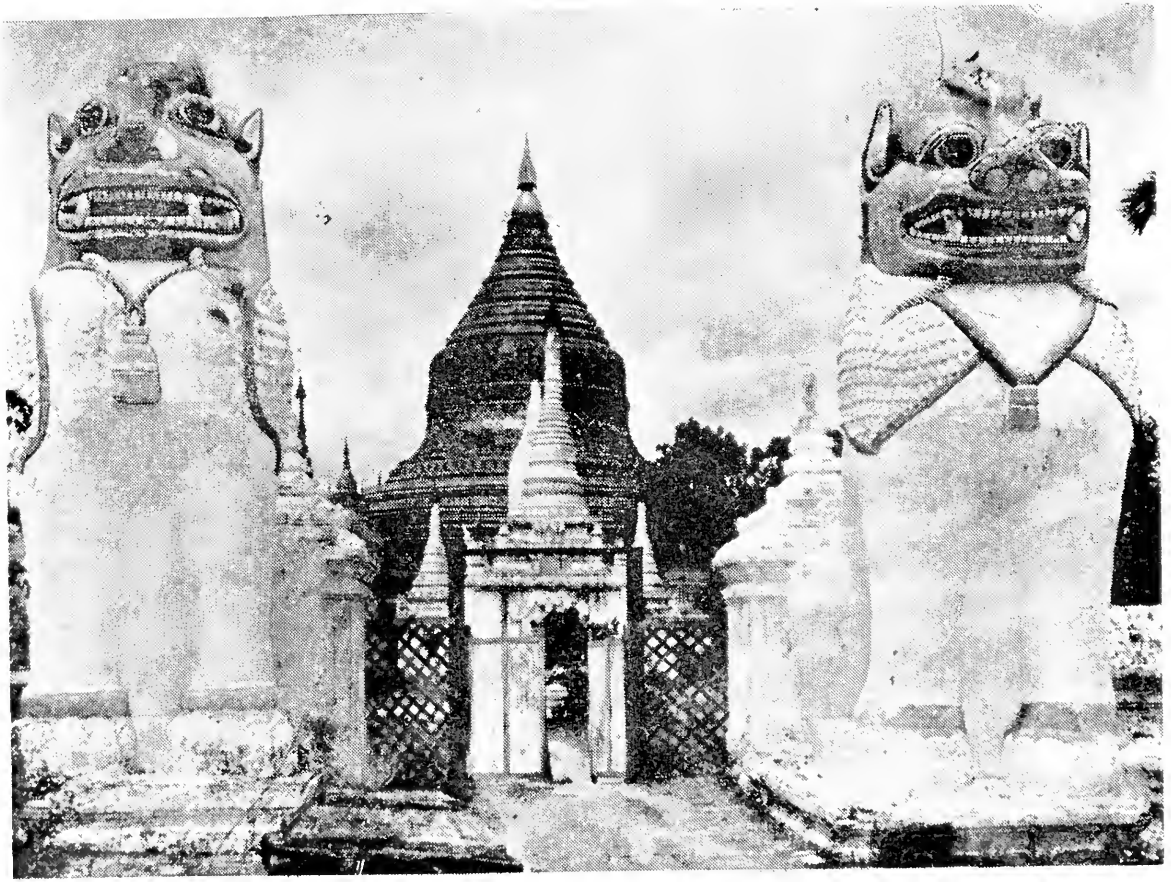


Manuha Temple



Upāli Thein

Htilo-minlo Temple



C Shwezigon Pagoda

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